

Adoptee Does Dressage

Rescued mustang finds success in her new career

BY HOLLY COVEY

CONTESSA IS AN AMERICAN mustang. A buckskin mare, she was captured while running with a herd in south central Wyoming. Her official Bureau of Land Management (BLM) records list her capture date as September 18, 2000, the day she became a part of the federal government's wild-horse and burro program.

When Tess was captured, she had the good fortune to become a "cell horse" at the Honor Farm, the wild-horse training and gentling program at the Riverton, WY, minimum-security prison. Selected inmates start by working on hay crews and feeding horses, then progress to handling the captured mustangs. When Tess came to us, she was gentle and accepting of the saddle and bridle, of being tied, and of having her feet handled. (For more about the Riverton program, visit www.wy.blm.gov/wildhorses/honor/levels.htm.)

Tess "graduated" from the prison program in January 2001, and the BLM posted her photograph on its auction Web site.

Paul Johnson and Cathleen Kirby, of Townsend, DE, were sympathetic to the plight of the mustangs. They knew that some BLM adoptions sour when inexperienced owners, attracted to mustang ownership by the low cost (current minimum adoption bid: \$125), find themselves ill-equipped to deal with their green mounts, some of which need special care and handling. Some adopted mustangs find themselves neglected and abandoned or even sent to auction and slaughter.

Paul and Cathy spotted Tess's photo and decided to bid when the online

auction opened. At the auction's end, the BLM Web site indicated that a Delaware resident had the winning bid. Tess was theirs.

Tess arrived in Delaware and, after time to settle in and gain some needed weight, went to a New Jersey woman for her initial training. Then Cathy began riding the mare, and soon after she asked me to give her dressage lessons.

I was prepared not to be impressed. The horse, I was sure, would be a small, scrubby, sewing-machine mover with a blunt head and a difficult attitude.

To my surprise, Tess was calm, confident, and cooperative, with rhythmic gaits and beautiful conformation. Amazingly surefooted, she gradually became rounder and softer, learned how to lunge in side reins, and improved her balance at all three gaits. Cathy's and my biggest challenge proved to be finding a bit that Tess liked. Her low palate, short mouth, and narrow jaw—typical mustang traits—made many bits uncomfortable. At last we hit on an old thin-mouth D-ring snaffle.

That spring, I showed Tess at Training Level at some dressage schooling shows. At her first show, Tess took several blue ribbons and a championship title. She went on to earn scores in the 60s at Training Level at shows throughout the season and even won the high-score senior performance-horse award—showing both English and Western—at the Mustang Savvy Days open show in Harrington, DE.

Tess has been a fun yet challenging horse to train. She can keep her balance no matter what, so it's hard to



Holly Covey and the mustang Contessa

convince her to bend when you want her to. Her keen hearing and eyesight mean that things several hundred yards away frequently catch her interest. Her reaction time is so quick that her spooks have left me in the dirt more than once. However, she has remarkable strength and endurance; and has legs, hooves, and a constitution of iron.

At one show, children gathered around Tess and kept calling her Spirit (name of the mustang hero of the 2003 animated feature of the same name). She soaked up the attention like an old ham. Tess is only a Training Level horse, but she is a great ambassador for her breed. Cathy and Paul hope that people will consider adopting mustangs for dressage and the other sport-horse disciplines, as Tess is proof that these horses are quick learners and can make useful and fun mounts. ▲

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